



“AS SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES HAVE GOTTEN MORE INVOLVED IN NEWS...THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOW THEY PRESENT THEMSELVES AND HOW THEY ACTUALLY FUNCTION HAS BEEN REACHING A BREAKING POINT.”

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Free speech on social media: where is the line?

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For Marian girls who use social media, the decisions being made to ban certain accounts and content is concerning. Junior Sydney Schroeder said she believes that “people can say, do or post whatever they believe in as long as they respect others and do so in a peaceful manner.”

In the fallout of Twitter’s decision to ban former president Donald Trump from its platform, a national conversation has been ignited around free speech on social media.

“Free speech frequently crosses into hate speech when others begin arguing and get angry. Slur dropping and tone raising become apparent in these situations,” Schroeder said. “[However] I don’t believe anything political should be taken down unless it promotes violence, or any illegal activity.”

The decision to ban and remove content may seem strange in the context of social media, but Becca Lewis, a PhD candidate in communication at Stanford University, has been researching the process for months. “As social media companies have gotten more involved as intermediaries in news and political coverage, the difference between how they present themselves and how they actually function has been reaching a breaking point,” Lewis said. “We need to acknowledge [Twitter and Facebook] as editorializers so we can hold them accountable for what they actually do.”

Mary Catherine Ruesch, Marian’s digital media coordinator, said that people equate the right to assembly with the right to use social media as a meeting place. “[Yet] with that comes rules,” Ruesch said. “Twitter is a company, they have their own brand to promote, and company values to uphold. If they feel like someone is violating that to an extreme, it is their right to ban someone or remove them.” Ruesch has a unique perspective on the matter, as she is responsible for all of Marian’s social media accounts. “If I shared something that did not uphold Marian’s brand, the six core values, the administration would have every right to

take it down.”

Ruesch sees social media as a marketplace of ideas and a platform for engagement. However, she has noticed a shift in its use, citing the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020. “In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, people were stepping up and being vocal. People were no longer afraid to expose the injustices they felt,” Ruesch said. “People have realized that their voice matters.”

Courtney McGann is the head of the social media management team at KreativElement, an internet marketing service in Omaha, Neb. “The word ‘censorship’ leaves a bad taste in your mouth, and for good reason. It’s a slippery slope,” McGann said. Yet, she views terms and conditions as a safeguard for the social media company to “help them carry out their fiduciary duty to their audience to shut down hate speech, stop scammers, help stymie the spread of misinformation and a lot more.”

Due to the liability placed on social media companies, McGann does not see unrestricted platforms as a solution to the current controversy. “As the standards of our news organizations have crumbled, we have now had to say that these social media platforms have a responsibility to their users/community to step in and uphold certain standards,” McGann said.

Platform leaders like Jack Dorsey and Mark Zuckerberg are facing an ethical dilemma: Is it possible to uphold the right to free speech and simultaneously halt the spread of misinformation and violence? In the coming years, there will likely be widespread reform around the use of social media, but there is no doubt that free speech is being redefined, leaving many users wondering “Where is the line?”

Graphic by Maddie Genoways



Freshman
Anna Egermayer
checks her socials.
Photo by
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